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Ending an abusive marriage is hard. Ending one in the evangelical church is harder.

It didn't matter what my husband had done to me, or that he wanted the divorce. I must have been at fault somehow.

By Hännah Ettinger May 9

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In the spring of 2013, I was 23, and I had to tell my father that my husband had decided he wasn't in love with me anymore and was filing for divorce.

Alone in my tiny rented bedroom in the D.C. suburbs, I sat down and wrote my father an email with my news. I was afraid of his response if I told him in person or on the phone, so an email felt safest. My father had been against this marriage from the beginning, had resisted my growing independence from his authority, and now, here I was, committing an unimaginable act and tarnishing myself forever. There was no going back from this; divorce was a sin.

My father's response was brief and to the point. I read it, shaking: *What is your theology of divorce?*

There was no overture of support, no anger, no emotion. Just a question about my faith, my theology, as if I had a choice, as if I had made this decision based on what I believed as a Christian. I shut my computer and cried.

I could show my father what had happened, tell him the stories. I could tell him about the nights I waited up for my husband to come home, watching the subway Twitter alerts for news of suicides until the system closed and I knew he hadn't jumped that night. I could tell him about the hours and hours of conversations in which he obsessed over his feelings for another woman and questioned whether he had ever been in love with me at all. I could tell my father about how, a month after we separated, my ex called me up and told me through tears that he'd slept with someone else, and it wasn't good, and could we still divorce but be friends with benefits? I could tell my father all these stories, but I knew it would never satisfy him, that I couldn't win the battle for his support with evidence.

The burden of proof was on me, and at stake was my family's support, the validity of my faith and my character. I couldn't win. For him, and many other Christians like him, the only reason to end a marriage is when a partner has been unfaithful and is unrepentant. In my marriage, no one cheated, so there were no "valid" grounds to divorce, no matter how emotionally abusive, disrespectful and unstable our marriage had become.

This set of beliefs has been front and center in the news recently as Paige Patterson, a highly respected leader in the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) of churches and the president of the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, was called out for making similar statements about abuse and divorce. Since 2000, he has been recorded advising women in abusive marriages to "pray about it," "settle it in the church of God," and "if you suffer for it, and if you were misused, and if you were abused, and if you're not represented properly, it's okay. You can trust it to the God who judges justly." Patterson has responded to the online backlash over these comments by saying that he cannot apologize "for what I didn't do wrong."

My father had attended an SBC church in San Francisco as a young man, before leaving the denomination in protest of the 1984 ordination of Julie Pennington-Russell — he, and many other Southern Baptists believed (and still believe) that the ordination of women is a functionally heretical act on the part of that church. (Pennington-Russell was practically driven from the denomination herself and now serves as a pastor in D.C.)

While my father is no longer in the SBC, he and Patterson think similarly about divorce, and they are far from alone: Many evangelical pastors still offer the same counsel on issues of abuse and divorce, and women like me pay the price. Because my actions did not align with my father's ideology, I became a potential threat to the patriarchal order that my father used to run our family. He prevented me from telling my siblings the news myself, saying he didn't know what I believed anymore and that he couldn't risk a potential bad influence on them. He regulated what I could and could not talk to my younger sisters about: topics of modesty, purity, dating, romance were off-limits. When I got diagnosed with PTSD and lost my job, I was alone. He and my mom fought about it — she wanted to show me support; he didn't want to endorse my "decisions" by helping me out.

Now that no-fault divorce is common in America, allowing victims of intimate-partner violence to escape varying degrees of abuse without much of a social cost, it can be confusing and difficult for people outside these faith traditions to understand the theological rationale driving men like Patterson and my father.

It's a common problem in evangelical circles. Within the Together for the Gospel Coalition (T4G) roster, a group of like-minded representatives from various evangelical denominations that holds an annual summit as a display of solidarity of purpose, many pastors have faced similar PR issues after promoting this theology. John Piper, an American Reformed Baptist pastor whose writings have made him a household name in American evangelical Christianity, has issued multiple responses to his statement that a woman in an abusive marriage should suffer for a season.

When I was a teenager in a Sovereign Grace Ministries (SGM) church in Virginia, I heard stories of our pastor, Gene Emerson, giving my mom's friend similar advice after she came to him seeking counsel regarding her abusive husband. My mom was disturbed at the time and told me about in great detail. "He told her to 'be more submissive,' to 'be more [sexually] available,'" she said. "Gene wouldn't help her get her husband to go to counseling — the husband as the head of the family had to initiate

that process, not her." The woman eventually got a divorce to save herself and her daughters from the physical abuse but had to leave the church to find support for their escape. Emerson was later found guilty of soliciting prostitution.

The theology of male headship and the theology the SBC, SGM and T4G churches teach about marriage is inherently patriarchal, founded in a historical tradition of supporting societies that thrived on women being homemakers and men being breadwinners, on virginity and fidelity in marriage as vital for proving paternity to ensure safe transfer of an inheritance from father to son. The men in these churches, which endorsed the Danvers Statement regarding "biblical manhood and womanhood" in 1987, believe in what they call "complementarianism." Complementarianism establishes binary gender roles as the only biblical way of living. It eliminates the possibility of women leading at home or in the church, and requires women to submit to men in their marriages, in society and in the church.

In my family, that meant that my father believed that he had ultimate authority and responsibility for me until I got married, at which point he would "transfer his authority over" to my husband. It meant that my mother, and many other women like her, believed that they could not make big decisions for themselves or their families without their husband's seal of approval, but the husbands could make decisions unilaterally (though many sought their wives' counsel). It meant that my father thought he could veto relationships I wanted to have, it meant that I could ask him to reconsider a decision but never directly challenge him without being in sin and disrespecting his God-given authority. It meant that I knew that if I got divorced, I was risking being disowned and never seeing my mom or siblings again without his permission.

And it meant that if my husband was leaving me, it must have been because I didn't submit to him well enough, I didn't do everything I could to save the marriage, I failed to be a godly woman, and it was my fault that he was leaving me.

To their credit, the pastors at the church my ex and I attended at the time never suggested any such thing. I felt loved and supported by them; I never felt judged. But I knew that my friends from college or from my home church in Virginia would have this alternate narrative in their heads: *What did she do wrong? What does she believe about marriage?* Or, as my father wrote me: *What is her theology of divorce?*

I wasn't going to be the woman trying to prove the weight of her suffering to a male authority. I knew that even if I tried to resist the divorce and fought my husband to stay, it would only end in toxic exchanges and animosity, and that nothing I could ever do would prove to my father that I had tried hard enough to make it work.

A woman in a complementarian church can never tell enough of her suffering to prove that she didn't deserve the treatment she receives. The woman in 2000 followed Patterson's advice and ended up with two black eyes. She came up to him on a Sunday, showed him her bruises: "I hope you're happy," she said. "Yes," he said, "I'm very happy" — because her husband had come to church with her.

I eventually stopped going to church. The effects of not knowing whom I could trust with my vulnerability were too much, and I've found myself much more secure without fundamentalist ideology defining how I live. It's easier to love people and be kind to myself if empathy comes before theology.

Until churches choose to believe that the suffering of victims of abuse in their communities is more important than their theology, they will continue to preach a false gospel that claims to offer support and love and instead reinforces power differentials that privilege abusers over their victims.

***Correction**: An earlier version of this post misidentified the seminary where Paige Patterson is president. It is the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.*

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